Building Seventh Chords

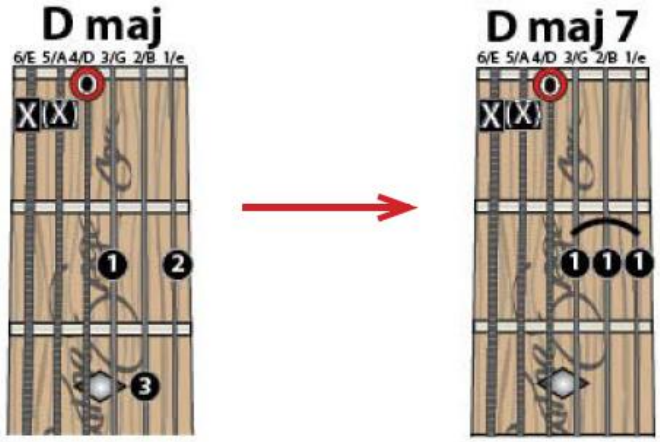
There is an expression that says, “Give a man a fish and he eats for a day, teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime.” That is to say, if I show you a chord and show you where to put your fingers on what frets, you could memorize the chord easily. But if I show you how to assemble chords from scratch, then I enable you for years to come. There are literally thousands of chords. So it’s your choice: memorize each chord or learn a method of assembling them and save yourself hundreds of hours. How cool would it be if I could show you how to make a seventh chord out of every chord that you already know instead of having to memorize hundreds of chords, effectively doubling or tripling your chord vocabulary in one night? If your answer was anything close to “Super-uber-mega-cool!!!,” then HANG ON, because we are getting ready to rock!

As a rule, shortcuts typically “cut” some stuff out and often times “short” you of the full picture. But you know that already, and that’s why you are studying so diligently. So digesting this information, understanding the concept and putting it into practice may take extra time up front (the long way), but I promise you it won’t take you nearly the amount of time it would take you to memorize a few hundred new chords (the “shortcut”).

The definition of a seventh chord is a chord consisting of a triad plus a note forming an interval of a seventh above the chords root. There are seven commonly used seventh chords in Western music. You can easily master these first 3 (most often used) formulas - immediately doubling your minor chord vocabulary and tripling your major chord vocabulary. How cool is that? Take your time with these and get the first three formulas down before moving to the others (FYI-The three most popular formulas are Major 7th, Minor 7th and Dominant 7th.)

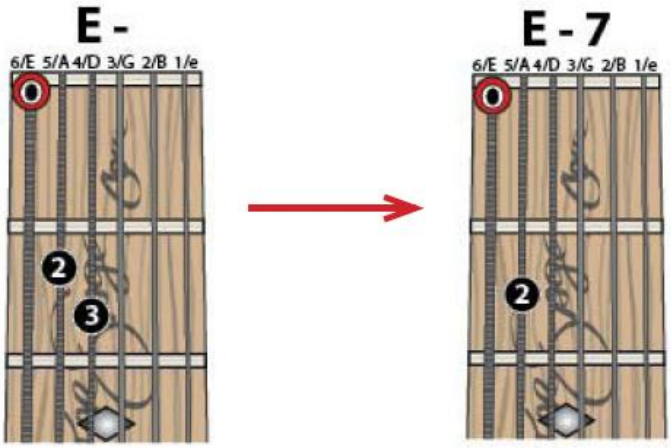
Major seventh - for example Dmaj7, DM7, DΔ, etc. (these are chord symbols that you will see on charts)

Formation -(1, 3, 5, 7): to easily convert any major chord into a major seventh chord, find a higher octave of the root and flatten it by a half-step (meaning, don't flat the lowest note - the root, but find a higher octave to alter). For example, play a D major chord. To convert this chord to a D major seventh, drop the high D on the second string back one half-step to Db (or C#). To play this easily, bar the second fret at strings 1, 2 and 3 while you play the 4th string open.



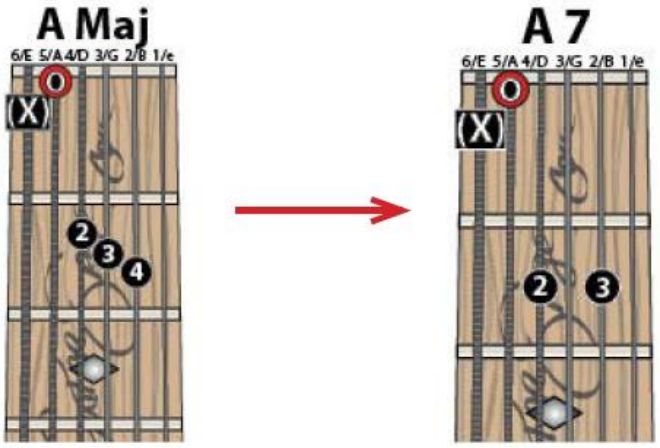
Minor seventh - for example Emin7, Em7, E-7, etc.

Formation - (1, b3, 5, b7): to easily convert any minor chord into a minor seventh chord, find a higher octave of the root and flatten it by one whole-step. For example, play an E minor chord. To convert this chord to an E minor seventh, drop the E on the fourth string back one whole-step to the open D. Then strum all the strings.



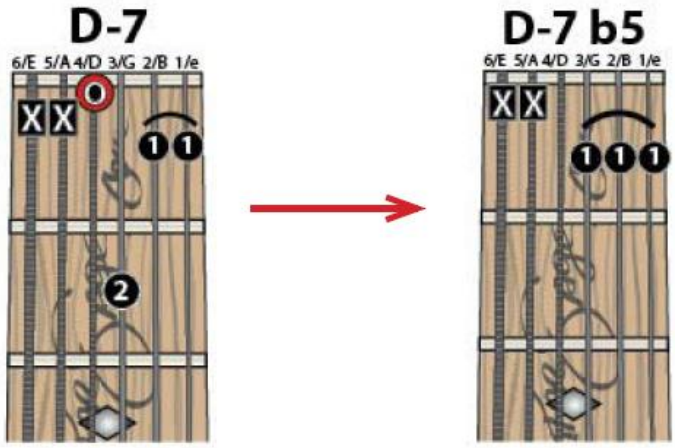
Dominant seventh - for example A7 or A7

Formation - (1, 3, 5, b7): to easily convert any major chord into a dominant seventh chord, find a higher octave of the root and flatten it by 1 whole-step. For example, play an A major chord. To convert this chord to an A dominant seventh, drop the A on the 3rd string back one whole-step to the open G. Then strum strings 1 through 5.



Half-diminished seventh - for example "D minor seventh flat five" Dm7b5, D-7b5, Do, etc.

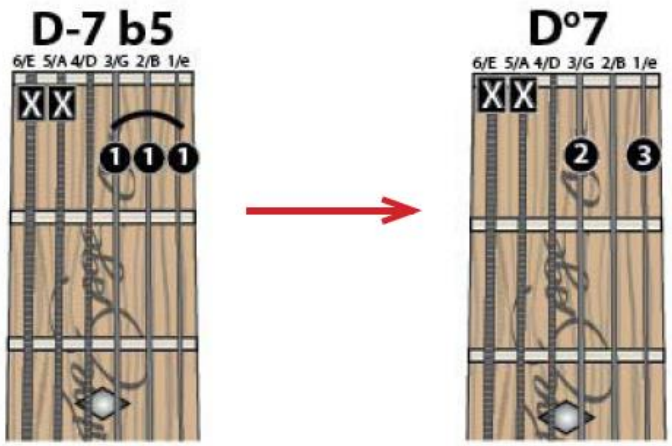
Formation - (1, b3, b5, b7): to easily convert any minor seventh chord into a half-diminished seventh chord, flatten the 5 by a half-step. For example, play a D minor seventh chord. To convert this chord to a D half diminished seventh chord, flatten the A on the 2nd fret of the 3rd string by a half-step, to an Ab (or G#). This chord can easily be played by barring strings 1-3 at the 1st fret and strumming strings 1-4.



Diminished seventh - for example D°7, or Ddim7

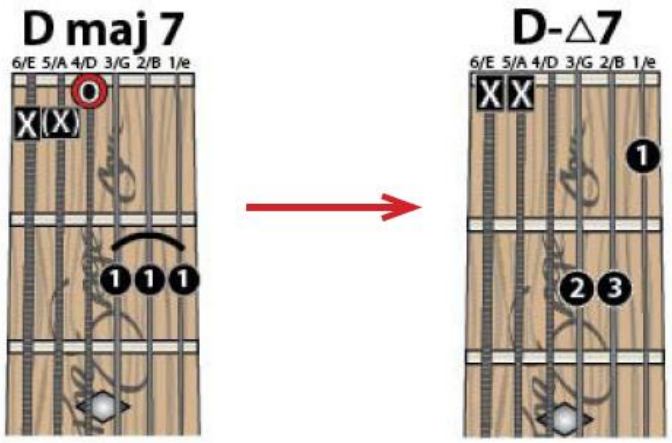
Formation - (1, b3, b5, bb7 (or 6 - known as enharmonic 6)): to easily convert any half-diminished seventh chord to a diminished seventh chord, flatten again the already b7. On the above D half-diminished seventh chord that we just played, flatten the C (on the second string)

by a half-step. The fretting should be as follows high E string (1st fret), B string (open), G string (1st fret), D string (open). Now, if you are anything like me, that double-flat seven (bb7) bothers you. This is how it is justified. These are 7th chords we are talking about right? How can a 7th chord NOT have a 7 (interval) in it, but a 6 instead? Things get a little complicated with this type if theory, but no worries! I will guide you through it. Too, I don't expect you to digest/retain all of this in one sitting. It may take several days or weeks for this to really settle in, depending on how much attention you give it. Let's keep moving forward.



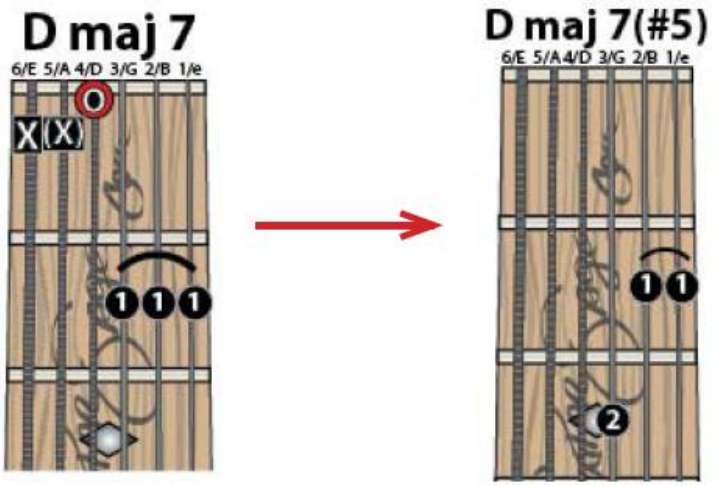
Minor major seventh- for example Dmmaj7, DmM7, DmΔ7, D-Δ7, etc.

Formation - (1, b3, 5, 7): to easily convert any major seventh chord to a minor major seventh chord (I know "minor major" right? Just roll with it.); flatten the third by a half-step. For instance, play the D major seventh chord from our 1st example. Now flatten the 3 which is on the second fret of the first string. If you move this one note back one half-step to the "F", it will produce a D minor major seventh chord.



Augmented major seventh - for example Dmaj7(#5), D+M7, D+Δ7, etc.

Formation - (1, 3, #5, 7): to easily convert any major 7th chord to an augmented major 7th chord; sharpen the 5th by a half-step. For instance, play a D major seventh chord. Now find the 5th and raise it by a half-step. The D string should be played open, while the 3rd string is fretted at the 3rd fret, and strings 1 and 2 are fretted at the 2nd fret.



Whew!!! Now go take a rest! I know your brain is tired! Mine sure is! Remember to take this slow. You could no more easily digest all of this than you could an entire Thanksgiving meal! But over time, this will be no problem. Remember, I can easily say "this is this chord, and that is that chord," but that won't make your brain start thinking - which is what I am trying to do here with you. If this feels like too much for you at one time, try to understand the concepts on the

first 3 examples. Those are the ones that you are going to use the most. Dominant seventh chords are very popular in blues and other styles of music, so if you like blues make sure that you understand dominant sevenths. If you're interested in learning jazz guitar, it will be important that you eventually learn all of these examples. Now go grab your guitar and start applying these concepts immediately so that they can become part of your playing.